Quinn Angelou-Lysaker

Lake Washington Girls Middle School

Grade: 8th

Age: 13

First Place Winner

I am a thirteen year old African-American girl. That information alone would conjure up a pretty accurate image of me: dark skin, dark hair, and trademark African-American facial features. However, given that description, the content of my character might surprise you. I speak articulately and typically use proper grammar. I live on Beacon Hill, go to private school, and am so exhausted with the black-girl preoccupation with hair that I chose to shave my own off completely. In fact, I cannot name a single gospel song, nor do I particularly like okra. In no way have I ever exemplified the black stereotype. Consequently, I've gone through life watching heads nod in approval when people listen to my music, notice the sweaters in my wardrobe, or see the ribbons I won in swim team. I've always felt more respected by those who perceived me as somehow "less black." From this unique perspective, looking black and "acting white," I've developed a critical eye for injustice.

One of my first encounters with injustice was a seemingly insignificant scene at a Safeway. I was about five, waiting in line with my mother. In front of us, there was a deaf man checking his groceries. The checker asked, in a regular conversational tone, "Debit or credit?" The man didn't reply. The clerk repeated his question louder and louder, turning heads throughout the store until he finally understood that the man couldn't hear at all. Even according to my (admittedly skewed) five year old stance on injustice, I knew that that wasn't fair. I could only imagine how many situations just like that one he'd been in before because of society's lack of deaf awareness. At my demand, my mother enrolled us all in sign language classes immediately. Injustice to

one deaf person is a threat to justice for anyone who struggles to communicate because of a condition or disability. I couldn't allow that injustice to slip by without taking action.

Another early encounter with injustice was in second grade. There were two boys named Caleb and Josh who were playing tetherball during recess. There were about seven or eight other kids watching and chanting in unison, "Caleb, Caleb, Caleb!" Josh's thin arms were no match for Caleb's powerful serves. A few even threw balls at Josh. I immediately joined the others and started cheering for Josh. A few turned to me in confusion. Caleb's easily foreseeable victory was met with cheers and hi-fives. Almost immediately after the game, Josh ran away from school in tears. I remember my anger and confusion at their blatant lack of empathy. Injustice during one tetherball game is a threat to any second grader's well-being. Though I failed, I had to do my best to take a stand.

As I grow older, I have become aware of other injustices around the country, particularly concerning race. Trayvon Martin's killing shocked and appalled me. Even more alarmingly, I recently read that only 13.1% of the USA are blacks, yet represent the largest percent of our prisoners. Further, I've noticed that black students tend to form their own separate group of friends in school. There was even a book written by Beverly Daniel Tatum that explains why this happens and the importance of racial identity for children of color. The issue of race is alive and well today, and is still one of our most prominent injustices.

I started learning about Dr. Martin Luther King in third grade. I was immediately fascinated with his willingness to put himself and his family in danger, be judged by millions, and even be imprisoned in pursuit of equality and justice. I was particularly struck by his Birmingham campaign. In regards to the sit-ins, he said he aimed to, “create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation.” His volunteers faced vicious police dogs, riots, thorough beatings, water hoses, even prison. King himself was jailed as well, and it was in that Birmingham Jail that he wrote his iconic letter to the clergymen. From St. Augustine, to Selma, Albany, Memphis, Montgomery, and Birmingham, Dr. King worked tirelessly toward his vision of freedom and equality.

I also admired his firm non-violence. Allied with Bayard Rustin, the Quaker group, and the American Friends Service Committee, he was adamant that justice be won through peaceful protest. He stuck to his Baptist morals despite the centuries of oppression and prejudice his race had suffered that could have easily led to hate-driven riots and uncontrolled violence. Even after his house was firebombed and he had the option of seeking revenge, he chose not to. He describes nonviolence as, “the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for justice and human dignity.” His perseverance and sacrifice knew no bounds.

About the same time I was learning about him, I started learning about bullying and the different roles people can play. One can be a bully, victim, bystander, or activist. Overtime I’ve begun to make the connection. One can be racist, discriminated against,

passively observe, or take action. This is how Dr. King's legacy applies to our world today. We are always presented with a choice. We can line up next to the other kids on the wall and chant with them, or root for the other kid. We can silently shake our heads at an inconsiderate cashier, or learn sign language. We can dismiss prejudice as a fact of life, or organize protests and help enact civil rights laws. It is up to everyone to help bring justice to disadvantaged persons of any kind, however and whenever we can, in order to end it altogether.

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